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Getting to 2023: COVID-19 and other issues for business

Aspen Medical Advisory Services
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Context

The COVID-19 pandemic has taken governments, business and individuals into uncharted territory. The pandemic is now in its third year and the global business environment is changing rapidly. A complex array of health, political, environmental, economic and social issues are contributing to instability and uncertainty across the world. To respond to these challenges and remain relevant, business and governments are seeking to consider new priorities, pivot and innovate. Strategic planning under these circumstances can be difficult.

Aspen Medical continues to provide support wherever we're needed, and recent years have seen us work with our clients to provide support and solutions to the myriad of COVID-19 challenges across sectors as diverse as tourism and the resources sector, as well as state and national governments. This paper sets out some of the strategic issues facing business as we head towards 2023. It also draws on our work on challenges with people, productivity, structure and innovation during the pandemic to date.

Current issues

Despite hopes and predictions that COVID-19 would dissipate with increased vaccination, infection and subsequent immunity, 'herd immunity' has not emerged. SARS-CoV-2 continues to mutate and reinfect populations globally. Omicron subvariants BA.4 and BA.5 have been responsible for a strong winter surge of transmission and infection, as they infected people who have been immunised or previously had COVID-19.

This has combined with increased circulation of influenza and people catching COVID-19 for the second (or even third) time to greatly increase the impact of these new variants. There is also a growing number of people developing long COVID.

While the BA.4 and BA.5 surge has now subsided, the combination of these variants has been very disruptive for both business and the community more broadly.

Some epidemiologists are now predicting that the worst of the pandemic is over and that future waves of infection are likely to be smaller, with less severe disease¹. Governments are reluctant to reintroduce public health measures such as mask mandates, so this places responsibility largely on individuals and organisations to minimise the impact of COVID-19. Business is acutely aware of this and the broader range of challenges.

¹ Worst of Covid over, experts say. *The Australian* 9 August 2022

COVID-19 issues for business

- **COVID-19 fatigue.** People just want the pandemic to be over and are becoming complacent about risk mitigation measures (IPC, PPE, social distancing, boosters, etc.).
- **Changed public health messaging.** Messages are currently mixed around return to the office, where masks are required or recommended, when to get a second booster, when to test and whether to use a RAT test or get a PCR. Social media also confuses this by showing the widely varying testing recommendations around the world.
- **Post-COVID-19 complications and effects.** Long COVID and other post-infection complications are becoming more common, as are other long-term impacts such as anxiety, depression and other mental health and wellbeing issues.

Other issues

- **Other infectious diseases.** Other diseases such as influenza, monkeypox (recently declared by the World Health Organization as a public health emergency of international concern), new virus transmission from animals to people (such as the recent cases of henipavirus in China²) and foot and mouth disease in Indonesian cattle, have entered public health discussions and are adding to disruption and anxiety.
- **Productivity disruption.** Staff are no longer exclusively working from home or the workplace, absenteeism is common due to illness, or caring for sick family members. Combined with skills shortages and supply chain disruption, it is difficult to maintain productivity (or even business continuity) and to manage obligations in workplaces where the organisation has limited control to acquit their obligations for work health and safety.

- **Increasing costs.** The cost of goods, services and energy has inflated and the cost of money is rising. However, there is significant pressure to hold costs down due to the rising cost of living in key areas such as food and electricity. The labour market is extremely tight, fuelling demands for increased wages.
- **Natural disasters.** Higher energy weather patterns as a result of climate change are causing increased fires and floods, which in turn increases the cost of repairs, rebuilding and insurance. Further, uncharacteristic extreme temperatures are impacting productivity, and in some cases health. The community is becoming aware of, and alarmed by, any climate incident and this is also fuelling uncertainty.

As governments loosen COVID-19 public health measures, business needs to enact sensible COVID-19 control measures, grounded in best-practice health policy and processes, that work to keep people safe, as well as to maintain productivity and business continuity. Organisations and businesses who survived since 2020 pivoted their business focus to align with markets that showed growth and opportunity. They were proactive and supported by their local and global partners to embrace technology and redeployed their workforce to reduce losses.

The coming year of the pandemic calls for new thinking and recognition of opportunities and new strategies as the changed world is emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic.

² *N Engl J Med* 2022; 387:470-472 <https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMc2202705>



Case studies



Cruise lines return to sail

Problem

At the start of the pandemic, passengers and crew on several international cruise ships developed COVID-19 and needed testing, quarantine and case management.

Issues

At the time, the companies and governing port authorities had little in the way of COVID-19 specific pandemic preparedness plans, risk assessment protocols or guidelines in place. They needed to comply with legislation and regulations that restricted movement of people, food and other goods into the quarantined spaces on their ships. A lack of medical supplies compounded the problem.

Solution

Aspen Medical, working with cruise operators and governments, developed:

- rapid turnaround testing and diagnostics
- regulations and guidelines to support the return of crews and ships to Australia that complied with country regulatory authorities
- sailing protocols to ensure the health of the crew and passengers
- guidelines and protocol training for all stakeholders on board the ship and at port.

Result

Aspen Medical improved identification of cases, reduced virus transmission, actively disseminated public health information and protected the wellbeing of the crew and passengers affected by COVID-19, supporting the return to sailing in 2022.



Audits of COVID-19 control for PNG mining companies

Problem

In March 2021, Papua New Guinea (PNG) was experiencing a major COVID-19 wave and Australia banned fly-in fly-out (FIFO) mine workers travelling to and from PNG. The resources sector faced the challenge of maintaining mining operations and protecting surrounding communities.

Several PNG mining companies asked Aspen Medical to review their COVID-19 controls to assure the safety of their staff, both local and FIFO.

Solution

Aspen Medical developed a COVID-19 Control Audit Toolkit and worked with the mining companies, both virtually and on the ground. We provided the latest information on COVID-19 prevention and response management, along with technology to support real-time and accurate contact tracing, testing and screening.

With the companies, we reviewed:

- compliance with PNG COVID-19 control directions and vaccination recommendations
- the effectiveness of biosecurity bubble arrangements at mines
- mine health services and care arrangements for people with COVID-19
- infection prevention and control measures and related clinical governance
- COVID-19 testing, including laboratory practices and skills assessments to improve reliability of testing.

Result

Strategic public health advice, extensive risk audits and gap analyses provided the framework to strengthen and improve COVID-19 policies, manage COVID-19 outbreaks and minimise disruptions in PNG mining operations.



International Anzac commemorations 2022

Problem

Australian Government International Anzac Day services in Türkiye and France recommenced in 2022. As government lead, the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) needed to ensure their personnel could travel and operate safely, even while these countries were experiencing high rates of COVID-19.

Solution

Aspen Medical advised and worked with DVA to develop operational plans, guidance and protocols that provided advice to 130 personnel before, during and after the services. We developed and provided safe practice guidelines to personnel travelling for the services and provided on-the-ground capability to support COVID-19-related health issues. We also liaised with other Australian Government agencies supporting the Anzac Day services.

Result

Aspen Medical's solutions led to minimal disruption to preparations as a result of COVID-19 infections. This solution supported continuity of service delivery in the important role of acknowledging, on Anzac Day, the service and sacrifice of the men and women who have served in wars, conflicts and peacekeeping operations.



Getting to 2023

People who run successful businesses are astute and creative. They understand that change is constant, and that people are critical to their business not only surviving, but ultimately thriving. So how can business head into 2023 and work through these challenges and opportunities?

Challenges

Change does not come easily for most people, whether it be organisational, structural or operational. Consumer behaviour has significantly changed in the wake of COVID-19, and this will continue. People may be even more resistant to changes now, just as many were not prepared for the lifestyle changes imposed by the pandemic.

- **People.** Successful businesses understand and support the needs of their staff. This ranges from broad wellbeing issues to mental health, from new work arrangements to trust in the workplace³.
- **Productivity.** Consider skills shortages, absenteeism due to illness, supply chain constraints and their impacts on productivity. Build in contingency to account for delays (time, costs).
- **Structural change.** Does your current organisational structure work? Could it be improved? Do you need to investigate different work arrangements, operational models or even different locations?
- **Innovation.** Does this upheaval offer opportunities that would or could not have worked before? Is there a silver lining?

Implementing change across a business requires more than simply giving information to the workforce and expecting compliance. One helpful tool is the behaviour change wheel⁴. It can help organisations to engage their employees to choose the mechanisms of change that resonate with them the most.

Opportunities

The local and global challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic will continue into 2023, so business must anticipate and plan accordingly. Whilst uncomfortable and challenging, it can also present opportunities to increase growth:

- **Trade.** Although not at pre-pandemic efficiency, supply chains are now becoming more functional, albeit with supply delays and high freight costs for both exporters and importers, compounded by major issues in the energy sector. Despite these challenges, new markets have opened due to a large expansion of online trading.
- **Innovation.** This latest year of the pandemic may invite innovations to help businesses and organisations become more efficient and effective. One example of this may be a reduction in centralised operational models to reduce supply risk, which may come at a cost of increased complexity.

³ <https://hbr.org/2021/04/what-psychological-safety-looks-like-in-a-hybrid-workplace>

⁴ Michie, S., van Stralen, M.M. and West, R. The behaviour change wheel: A new method for characterising and designing behaviour change interventions. *Implementation Sci* 6, 42 (2011) <https://doi.org/10.1186/1748-5908-6-42>

- **Travel and tourism.** While travelling on a flight, a bus and other forms of public transport has always borne some risk of disease transmission, the stakes are now much higher. New systems and guidelines will be needed to consider customer health and safety. These might include improved air quality and ventilation or changed insurance policies to reflect the likelihood of travel disruption. If flights are cancelled or delayed through increasing non-attendance, new rules are required that support passengers to feel safe and remain healthy during transit, have the opportunity to quarantine or isolate and have healthcare treatment as required as a visitor without family support. Tours face additional challenges, as passengers embark and disembark multiple times at different locations and interact with large groups of people in close proximity.
- **Education.** The return of students on campuses requires new systems where the teachers provide ongoing support to students who are sick via hybrid face-to-face and digital education.
- **Infrastructure.** Ventilation that helps prevent disease transmission is becoming an issue of increasing importance. Airports, schools, workplaces hospitals and healthcare and community centres require new building standards tailored to minimise airborne infection. Airports in particular require new design codes to ensure that isolation, social distancing, hand hygiene and quarantine border controls can be implemented efficiently while reducing overcrowding at arrivals, immigration and customs and quarantine. A review of the flow of people must work towards eliminating the significant bottlenecks at both security and immigration during peak periods.

Further information

Since the beginning of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has been tough for everyone, and especially so for business. Some have failed, but many others have pivoted and adapted and will need to continue to do so in the face of increased and more diverse challenges, with the added burden of pandemic fatigue.

We do not know what the world will look like in 2023, but we can make educated guesses and preparations. As the saying goes, fortune favours the prepared mind. By understanding and anticipating what is coming, we can all be better placed to move ahead with confidence.

Aspen Medical has great breadth and depth in COVID-19 management in an environment of changing public health advice and ongoing challenges.

For further information about how Aspen Medical can assist with your business journey into and beyond 2023, contact:

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